DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 146 619 CS 203 751

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TITLE Writing or Plagiarizing?
PUB DATE May 77
NOTE 4p.; Paper presented at the Leadership Conference of the New Jersey Council of Teachers of English (Lawrenceville, New Jersey, May 5, 1977)

EDRS PRICE MF-$0.83 HC-$1.67 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Composition (Literary); *English Instruction; Grade 7; Junior High Schools; Plagiarism; *Reports; *Research Skills; *Teaching Techniques

ABSTRACT

This paper notes that, when teachers assign the writing of research reports without showing children how to write such reports, they may actually encourage children to plagiarize. It then outlines a method used to teach seventh graders how to write short "controlled reports." Working as a group, the students learn how to pose research questions, use sources of information, organize information, write outlines, and compose reports from the outlines. The goal is for students to get the feeling of collecting and controlling information and to have the satisfaction of writing a report in their own words. (GW)

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WRITING OR PLAGIARIZING?

by Nancy D. Broz

While breakfasting at McDonald's recently, I overheard the parents of an 11-year-old discussing their son's work..."We can't keep going to the library and signing out thirty-two books....He still isn't finished...." and so it went, until I finally had to ask:

"Is your son having difficulty with a report?"

"No, *we're* having difficulty with his report! We've been to the library three times with him. Each night is a struggle to get him to his task and to help him organize it."

"What was his assignment?"

"To write a report on Venezuela. It's eighty pages long now."

I couldn't hide my irritation. "Did you have a conference with his teacher?"

"Oh, yes, we called. She said it was just to be a general report."

"Did she give him any guidelines?" By now, my teacher ethics were out the window. Another haphazard assignment made by a teacher who hadn't taught the child HOW to go about writing a report—particularly how to limit the topic.

And so the story goes. As I listen to teachers, see children struggling, and examine yearly samples of reports assigned in science, social studies, math or English classes, I become increasingly concerned. Are we teaching our children how to research and write reports, or are we actually teaching them the fine art of plagiarism?

Gathering information, outlining and writing any report is a difficult task. But it is particularly difficult for a middle school child who often has trouble with daily study and organizational skills. The task looms large and long, and, most frequently, he or she procrastinates and then copies the report just before deadline.

What is a realistic assignment for the middle school child? Should he or she be asked to write a ten- or fifteen-page report? Can he or she research all of Venezuela? Certainly, there is more value to a short, well-written paper of one or two pages than there is in a lengthy, ill-organized, copied report. All of the objectives that the teacher wishes to accomplish can be met in a short report. If errors occur, a second assignment can be made for re-teaching, without wasting weeks or even months on a single, erroneously done paper.

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What can be done? I offer as a suggestion the "controlled report." This report, which need be only a half page long to accomplish its goal, is done by everyone—at the same time—in the same way—and with exactly the same sources of information. The important thing is the process of doing the report. The goal is for the child to get the feeling of collecting and controlling information, and the satisfaction of a completed report written in his own words. I do not suggest that this is a new way to write a report, but rather that the organizational approach is applicable to *all* research writing.

The next most helpful skill is writing the introduction and conclusion. Basically, the question is stated in the introduction and answered in a summary conclusion. The paragraphs of the body provide the supportive evidence to answer the question. This organizational scheme insures the child a cohesive report.

The most important skill to teach is how to turn the topic into a specific question which will be answered by the end of the paper. This question, essentially, is a limited topic. But to the middle school child, it makes more sense. It also helps him or her to differentiate between relevant and irrevelant information.

The following is an example of how this process works in my seventh grade classroom.

In September I begin preparing my students for the reports they will have assigned in other classes. We start with a novel such as *Old Yeller* or *Split Bamboo*. By the time we're mid-way into the book, I give the first writing assignment. It is a question that must be answered as an essay. Perhaps it is "Is Old Yeller intelligent?" or "What kind of man is Richard Bliss?"

Together, we write the essay. First, each child must decide wnat he or she thinks the answer is. Then, the child must prove his or her point by finding specific examples in the book and listing them—*not* in sentences, but in three- or four-word notes in his or her *own words*.

Next, we compare notes and decide on one set to use for the group essay. We organize these notes into the order in which we will use them. Then, we make an outline and discuss the purposes and importance of the introduction and conclusion. Copies of the outline are given out the next day and each child writes his or her own paragraph from it. The first research paper has been written!

After several similar assignments, each time using the same process, the children are ready for the unit: *Who is Marvin?* The end result of this unit is a mini-report (about two pages) about termites. In reality, this is a contrived report; I know the end result before the students begin.

All of the sources for the unit are written by me and dittoed. Since I want to make the point that varied sources are important, and also show the children how to make bibliography cards for different kinds of sources, I provide five: an encyclopedia article about termites; a "book" about them; an interview with Marvin W. Termite; a newspaper article about a termite-ant battle; and a magazine article about the queen termite. A bibliography card is made for each source, with information listed in the order that it will be written on the finished bibliography. Each card is numbered (1-5).

The next class assignment is to read all of the sources. The entire class then formulates a question which could be answered from the information (i.e., "In a termite colony, how many kinds of termites are there and what does each do?"). This question is the basis for the entire report.

The next assignment is for each child to underline information in all five sources which answers the question. File cards are made (dittoed and cut out) and notes are taken. The important keys to the note-taking process are (1) determining topics for headings on each note card; and (2) writing notes in students' own words—NO sentences are allowed! This is the key to avoiding plagiarism.

Once the note cards are made, the organization process begins. Each child divides his or her cards into separate piles according to topics. Then, each small pile is arranged in the order that the information should be written. This is the basis for the student's outline. Since all information on note cards is in phrases, the outline is in topic form.

The next day, the students are told to bring only a pencil and the outline to class. They have a twenty-minute time block in which to write a non-stop rough copy from their outlines. This is the key activity . . . the secret to the success of the report. When done in this way, the paper will have to be in the child's own words. The security of the well-organized outline will make the task of writing the rough copy a very simple one. Once proofread, the final copy will be a cinch!

After doing this report together, the class members are ready to go on their own. Subsequent research assignments for any class are done by the same process. Usually we assign reports as interdisciplinary projects—with two or even three subject teachers involved, and with each teacher participating in the organization and grading processes. A time schedule is provided to help the students plan their work, and each step in the process is checked by a teacher before the student can go on to the next step. With this method, reports have become simpler, easier, and more successful. They are a true reflection of the child's own work and writing style.